**A Single Decision (Take Two)**

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]
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**Chapter 31**

Torrents of rain lashed on the windows, and thunder boomed in the distance, casting strange shadows on the gigantic twin portraits of Alto Stratus and Thorne Kraym. Water dripped from the cloaks of Grievous and his magnaguards, onto the pristine marble floors of the Hall of the Heroic Laborers.

"Welcome, General, welcome," said Thorne Kraym, Chairman of the Central Committee of the National Worker's Alliance of Jabiim, the longest title for any head of state Grievous had ever encountered before. Kraym was clean-shaven and had his steel-grey hair neatly-cut, in the military fashion Grievous had seen among these Humans. The civilians wore their hair longer, and the men had beards. Why was a question beyond his interest. "I trust everything was to your liking?"

"Your army and your industries are satisfactory, Chairman," Grievous said, putting his arms behind his back and looming over the man. "Your people are the least incompetent I have dealt with in recent memory." In truth, the Jabiimis were highly competent, well-organized, and disciplined. Grievous was impressed, but he'd never say it, the last thing he needed was for some of his most effective forces to get complacent.

"I am glad to hear that," said Kraym, not even bothering to waste a fake smile on Grievous. "I must confess, things are not all well on Jabiim. The Republic has never forgiven us for our so-called treason, you know."

"The ores of this world must be sorely missed on Coruscant," Grievous said, wondering where Kraym was going with this.

"Their ties to the Hutts run deep. Even as we speak, cartel runners are smuggling in all manner of deplorable substances, and taking advantage of Jabiim's most vulnerable workers," Kraym said. "We can fight them indefinitely, without a problem. But so long as the war continues, quotas will need to be met, shifts will be longer, and rest will elude us all. Many have turned to these illicit substances."

"Weakness can be found even here, I see," said Grievous.

"It's an unfortunate truth, General." Kraym clasped his hands together, a shadow of a smile on his face. "We can never stem the tide of illegal drugs on Jabiim. We put their smugglers and dealers to death whenever we find them. But there's always someone willing to risk it all for a few credits more. My plan is to strike a blow much higher up on their distribution chain."

"I'm listening."

"There is an individual on Republic Intelligence's payroll, residing on Zeltros, in the capital city of Ibisa. He manages the deals between the Hutt cartels and their Republic backers. Both sides trust him. Replacing him would be... difficult." Kraym gave Grievous a sly look. "My sources tell me you're planning a move on Zeltros next, General."

"Perhaps," Grievous said. *Aclinde has sealed many leaks, but not all, I see...*

"This target would bolt the moment he sniffed an invasion fleet coming," said Kraym. "I want to send someone before you do anything drastic. Someone who will blend in, someone he won't see coming."

"Do you intend to paint one of your assassins red?" Grievous asked.

"Why do that when we've got the real thing?" Kraym chuckled, clearly very pleased with himself. "Come, General, meet our agent."

Kraym lead Grievous and the magnaguards to a secluded room, guarded by the famous Nimbus Commandos. Inside were three more people. Two of them were Jabiimi men, obviously Nimbus Commandos too. The third was a Zeltron girl, tall, well-built, and red of skin. His sensors told him that she had a mechanical left arm under her plain clothes, and many more cybernetic modifications inside her body, especially in her spinal chord. The Zeltron's eyes widened when she saw Grievous, and she shrank back.

*You're supposed to be dead,* Grievous thought, as the magnaguards matched her facial profile to padawan Zule Xiss, reported killed in action on Jabiim almost three years ago. He raised himself up to his full height, glaring down at the Zeltron.

"General, this is Comrade Colonel Mazzi and Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel Mofuwa of the Nimbus Commandos. Comrade Mofuwa leads our off-world special operations," Kraym said.

"Yes, I know you," Grievous said, looking at Mofuwa. The bronze-skinned man looked much more at home in a uniform. "You gave my agent on Zygerria trouble."

Mofuwa straightened his stance, and stared dead ahead. "I was caught off guard by her, General. I expected someone... older."

"I intend to give her trouble myself, so today, I bear no ill-will towards you," Grievous said. He was still annoyed that Komara had had the nerve to snap at him. "I see a ghost among you. Explain."

"So you know who this is?" asked Colonel Mazzi. He was older than Mofuwa by a decade, but probably younger than Kraym by the same amount.

"Zule Xiss, Jedi padawan, presumed dead for three years," Grievous said, letting himself hunch back down as he stalked over to the Zeltron girl. She took a step backwards as he loomed over her, jaw locked tightly but fear in her eyes. "The report said you were crushed by a falling walker. To death. How are you even alive?"

"She was dead, for seventeen minutes," Mazzi said. "We knew a Jedi had gone down under the walker, such a prisoner would be very valuable to us. While the walker had broken her spine and drowned her in the mud, she was not beyond saving, as you can see."

*Drowning in mud beneath a fallen machine,* Grievous thought. *That's an ignoble death at best. Fittingly ignoble, for a Jedi.* "This did not come cheaply, did it?"

"We had to rebuild her spinal chord and replace several organs, and that's not to mention what it took to restore her brain." Mazzi frowned. "We restored it a little too well. The re-education was a very difficult process."

"Mazzi thinks we should have nerve-stapled her and been done with it," said Kraym, a glint of humor in his eyes. "But I didn't want a flesh-robot, I wanted a real Jedi to serve Jabiim."

*Nerve-staple?* Grievous had no idea what that was, but it did not sound pleasant. Xiss flinched at the very uttering of the words. "Can she speak?" he asked.

"She can," Mofuwa said. "Comrade Xiss, speak to the General."

"I have nothing to say to the General, Comrade Mofuwa," said Xiss, through grit teeth.

"Comrade this, comrade that," Grievous said, trying not to roll his eyes. "I see your re-education worked."

"Zeltrons are the perfect assassins," said Kraym. "They're empaths, they've got *distracting* pheromones, and who ever suspects a Zeltron is up to no good? Comrade Xiss has been trained in all manner of weapons and hand-to-hand techniques. She has her Jedi magic to call upon. Nothing will stop her. The reach of Jabiim will have grown long indeed, when we strike at this far-off enemy."

"Very well, Chairman," Grievous said. "I will send her to Zeltros with my agent. Will she require a handler?"

"Comrade Mofuwa will accompany her," Mazzi said. "It won't be his first solo mission."

Grievous could have cackled. This was a better punishment for Komara than anything he could have came up with.

Once again, Esera found *Encounter* in orbit of Raxus Prime. Only droids answered her hails, Voyan and Murshida were on the surface. *Might as well go see what they're up to,* Esera thought, still in a grim mood after what had happened on Stalimur. *Whirlwind* smoothly soared down, through the dark clouds and out over a dark land of hills. But they weren't natural hills, they were mounds of debris and junk, laid down over thousands of years, sedimentary formations made of metal and plastic. The transponder on *Encounter*'s cargo shuttle was nearby, and *Whirlwind* was a quiet ship, the two men didn't seem to notice her approach. Esera could barely make them out in the gloom and the rain. Upon landing, she scrambled over slippery pipes and decaying hull plates, and was soon within hearing distance of the two. Voyan was speaking:

"...delusions, Murshida, it's all delusions and lies. History is not a linear process of progression. The very idea of historical progress would belong in the dustbin of history, as if this whole galaxy isn't its own dustbin. Look at us, our society is built on technology left behind by the Rakatans, we don't even know how it works. All we do is change what the outside looks like. You ever heard of black dwarf stars?"

"You will have to clarify," said Murshida.

"When a star can no longer fuse elements in nuclear fusion, one of its outcomes is that it turns into a white dwarf. Just a hot little ball of degenerate matter, hot enough to emit heat and light. Eventually, it all radiates out and it turns into a black dwarf. The problem is, this process would take a quadrillion years- or a quintillion, or a sextillion, septillion, and on! We don't know, the universe is only thirteen billion years old. But, you know what? Black dwarves exist. Something sucked the energy out of those stars and accelerated their decay by several orders of magnitude more than the current age of the universe. And who did this? The Rakatans!" Voyan and Murshida were carrying sliced-apart plates into the cargo shuttle as they spoke, going back and forth between a pile and the ship as the rain poured down on their plastic cloaks.

"You see," Voyan went on, "the Rakatans were so powerful that they could rewrite the fabric of reality. And look at us now, throwing durasteel into a shuttle, out in the acid rain. Tell me, what progress have we made? How can there possibly be some end-point of history where we finally progress enough to be finished? It's a lure, it's a bait, it's a justification do whatever they want, if it's all in the name of achieving the final-"

The two of them froze, and looked over at Esera. "Hello, Captain," Murshida said.

"You really like turning up out of nowhere, Captain," said Voyan. The two resumed their trek to the shuttle, metal plate in hand.

"What are you two even talking about?" asked Esera, now mindful of the acid rain on her cloak and boots.

"Lieutenant Voyan and I were having a discussion on historicity," said Murshida. "You missed some very heated debates."

*A heated debate on historicity,* thought Esera, unimpressed. *The people I surround myself with...* "You two are really weird, do you know that?"

"And that's why we're your crew," Murshida said.

"We all deserve each other, and I don't mean that in a nice way, Captain," Voyan agreed.

*Yeah, this is where I belong,* Esera thought, feeling more at peace already. Not happier, but not uncomfortable either. Voyan and Murshida were not normal people. Esera didn't understand them any better than her own family, but at least they were abnormal like she was. Just in another way.

"How long have you two been down here?" she asked.

"Off and on for several days," said Voyan. "This planet is a treasure trove, if you know the right people."

"The Jawas, he means," said Murshida. "Strange little creatures."

"Is that what I smell?" Esera asked.

"No, Captain, that's the acid rain on your organic fiber cloak," said Voyan. Esera looked at the fabric, and saw the miscolored splotches forming on it, faintly smoking. She yelped and rushed for cover in the cargo shuttle. The mechanic-engineer had the grace to not laugh out loud.

"As it turns out, Captain Komara," Murshida said, "the acid rain of Raxus Prime does not have much effect on plastic. Thus our shabby attire."

"You could have told me sooner!" yelled Esera.

Voyan gave her his cloak once they'd finished loading up the cargo shuttle, and in short order both the shuttle and *Whirlwind* were on board *Encounter* once more. And once more, the hangar floor was filled with junk, Esera had to keep *Whirlwind* at a hover until Voyan's droids cleaned out a space for the star courier. The Lieutenant looked particularly worse for wear. He had acid burns on his work coveralls, which had already been badly worn before.

"You're going to need new clothes," Esera said to him.

"Why?" asked Voyan.

"Because we're going to Zeltros. You've got two styles, Voyan, grubby mechanic and Druckenwell dance floor, neither of them will work for our mission," said Esera.

Voyan's spirit darkened at the mention of Zeltros. "Why are we going to *that* place?"

"Grievous wants me to make a deal with them. That means negotiations. And last time I negotiated with a planetary leader, he tried to get me drunk- he *did* get me drunk, actually, and then tried whisk me off to his chambers," said Esera, her skin crawling at the memory. "So I'm not going in alone, this time. You're coming with me."

"Why me? Why not Murshida? He's the warrior, here!" Voyan's brow furrowed in confusion.

"Because you're a lot less scary than a Skakoan Cyber-Guard, if things go peacefully instead of creepy," Esera said.

"Thanks," said Voyan, giving her a flat stare.

*What the hell?* thought Esera. *I tell him he's* not *scary and he takes it as an insult? Ugh! What is it with this guy?* "Look, this isn't negotiable, Lieutenant. You and I are going down to Raxulon, I've got some friends who can clean you up and make you presentable for diplomatic missions of this level."

"Fine," the mechanic-engineer groaned.

"When's the last time you got new clothes, anyway?"

"When I got this uniform... a few years before the war," said Voyan.

Now it was Esera's turn to stare. "You live a very boring life, don't you?"

"It used to be a lot less boring. That's why I don't want to go to Zeltros."

*Oh, joy,* thought Esera. *Like I needed an even moodier Voyan...* Then again, was she one to talk?

Returning from Kalee to Coruscant was surreal, for Shaak Ti. It was hardly possible for two planets to be more unlike. She stepped ten thousand years into the future when she arrived back at the galactic capital, from steam trains and wheeled motor-carriages to repulsorcraft and airspeeders, from mud brick and tin-roofed shacks with animal corrals to durasteel arcologies two thousand meters high that were agriculturally self-sufficient. That wasn't all that bothered her, though. Try as she might, the connection between Grievous and Komara wasn't something she could ignore. *It was not by chance that Esera Komara and Grievous met,* Shaak Ti had thought many times on the journey back. For the moment, her problem was how to tell this to the Council without sounding like a Qui-gon-level heterodox rogue at best, and a Dooku-level heretic at worst.

For the moment, though, the Council was more interested in the account of Grievous's life as Khagan Qymaen jai Sheelal. The shuttle bombing was news to them all. "This sounds like we were framed," Mace Windu said, with a tight frown.

"Anonymous bombs are not the Jedi way," Ki-Adi Mundi agreed.

"Another lie of Dooku's, I suppose," said Obi-wan Kenobi, stroking his beard. "It *is* a lie, isn't it, Master Yoda?"

"A lie it is," said Yoda.

"So we deny bombing Grievous's shuttle," said Kit Fisto.

"A categorical denial," Yoda said. "Remember I Qymaen's name from that war. Powerful warrior was he... A boy were you, in those days, Obi-wan. Barely a padawan."

"The Yam'rii-Kaleesh war ended in 960," said Mace Windu. "How old does this make Grievous, if he was already a planetary warlord over twenty years ago?"

"Fifty-four standard years old," Shaak Ti said. "That's more than the life expectancy on Kalee."

"He's old enough to be my father," muttered Obi-wan.

"Most of us here are," said Ki-Adi Mundi dryly, giving the Council's youngest member a mildly-annoyed glare.

"Hard to imagine, it is, thinking that age old," Yoda said, giving them all a pointed look. "Matters not, it does. A powerful warrior he was then, a powerful warrior he is now. More powerful. There is great anger in his heart. Understand now, do I, what pain drives him. Revenge he seeks, for justice that failed to be done. But beyond all reason, he is now."

"It would be regrettable if Kalee has suffered unjustly," said Mace Windu. "Regardless, I agree. Grievous is a rabid beast. You can pity what brought him to such madness, but he must still be put down. For the sake of the galaxy."

The Council nodded in agreement, but for Shaak Ti. She stared at the window, at the skylanes beyond the Temple.

"Something more to say, have you, Shaak Ti?" asked Yoda.

"I don't know if he *can* be put down," she said in a quiet voice.

"I've come close," Obi-wan said. "Grievous is crafty and cunning, but he's no match for a prepared Jedi master."

*That's not what I meant,* thought Shaak Ti, but now telling the Council about her worrisome theory didn't seem like a good idea. Discovering *why* the Force had brought Grievous and Komara together was her goal now. The girl's philosophical pedigree stretched all the way back to Dooku in his Jedi days, if she really did take after Olor Callo. That this was a coincidence was simply not possible. She needed to speak with Obi-wan, alone.

"If I might change the subject, what became of the investigation of Janus Greejatus?" asked Shaak Ti.

"Greejatus is a failed politician, by all accounts," Ki-Adi Mundi said. "He was the Chomnell sector's senator for two years before Queen Amidala had him removed for opposing non-Human immigration. But he was a close associate of Palpatine's, from the start of his career until the Chancellor's death."

"We believe that Greejatus was one of Sidious's agents working influence on the highest levels of the Republic," said Obi-wan. "We've put him under surveillance, but we haven't made a move yet."

The Council then turned their attention from the Grievous report to the latest political ongoings; namely, the very likely rise of Senator Wilhuff Tarkin to the chancellorship.

A week of useless waiting followed Tarkin's call for a vote of no confidence in Amedda, as the cretins of the Senate had deliberated and debated on how to go about their vote. Amedda's faction put every roadblock it could into the way of the vote, but inevitably, the day of the vote arrived, and Amedda was thrown out without ceremony. Most everyone agreed, he had to go. The question now remained: who would lead the Republic, in its darkest hour?

"Darkest hour," Tarkin scoffed, turning off the booth's holotank, in his favorite low-profile social club. "Kashyyyk was merely a setback! Of course a bunch of civilian idiots can't see that. The only see the scary big numbers."

"Can you blame us?" asked Janus Greejatus, grinning without warmth. He was a gaunt, tight-mouthed man, his eyes shadowed by permanent lack of sleep. "It's a frightening time, with Grievous on the loose again. You *politicians* told us he was bottled up in the Outer Rim, months away from defeat."

"And he was, until Amedda bungled it," Tarkin said.

"Was it really all his fault, though?" asked Sate Pestage, who managed to look even more unhealthy than Greejatus.

"Or was there something else going on in the background? A powerplay by an up-and-coming senator?" Greejatus continued, folding his hands. "I sense there was more than meets the eye to our defeat."

Tarkin could do nothing but smile coldly. *I see why Palpatine kept these two around, they're much sharper than any of the idiots in the Senate.*

"Don't get us wrong, Senator," said Pestage. "Who lives and who dies is of little concern to us as it was to our late master. We only wish to continue his plan."

"I didn't think Palpatine owned slaves," Tarkin remarked.

"We use it as a term of respect towards our departed lord," Greejatus said. "There is much you don't know about Sheev Palpatine. There is much he planned that was set in motion but has yet to come to pass. And will never come to pass, unless we find a way to carry it out. The plan was as much our life's work as it was his."

"I'm not sure what you gentlemen are getting at."

"We know all of Palpatine's secrets. We have his resources, we have his knowledge. We could be of great use to you," Pestage said. "As a show of good faith, we've leaked a story to the press that will damage the peace faction's credibility. Keep your eyes on the news tonight."

"Thank you for your support," said Tarkin. "But what do you want in turn? Wealth? Power? Something more distasteful?"

"It's always been about the power, Senator," Greejatus said. "Our vision is of a galaxy ruled by the Human race with an iron fist. All the alien filth, the deviant scum, the weak-minded preachers of liberal democracy and sentient rights, crushed under the boot where they belong. If Palpatine taught me anything, it was this: there is nothing but power in this universe. Morality, truth, bah! There is no morality and no truth but for strength."

"I cannot say you're wrong, Greejatus," Tarkin said, taking a sip of tea. "But do you really have to phrase it in such an... vulgar way?"

"That is the nature of the universe, Senator." Greejatus spread his hands. "I can only tell it how it is."

"My comrade here has neglected to mention the Jedi have him under surveillance as well," Pestage said. "Not that it's very effective. We gave them the slip easily."

"What could the Jedi possibly be interested in *you* for? You haven't been in the Senate for over a decade," Tarkin said.

The two cronies looked at each other. "Do we tell him?" Greejatus asked.

"You're the sensitive here," Pestage said. "You decide if we can trust him."

Greejatus looked back to Tarkin, eyes narrowed. And then Tarkin felt something, inside his mind, a presence that wasn't his own. *Mind reader? A Jedi? Or a-*

"No, I'm no Sith," Greejatus said, as the presence withdrew. "But I cannot deny the dark side of the Force is a pathway to many abilities some consider to be... unnatural." He and Pestage shared a knowing smile.

"Are you aware the Jedi are searching for a Sith lord?" asked Pestage.

"I'd heard rumors, yes," Tarkin said. "This... Darth Sidious, isn't it?"

"The very same," said Greejatus. "It's true, all of it. Sidious controlled the Republic. All of us in Palpatine's inner-most circle knew Sidious. His goals were the same as ours. And perhaps they are the same as yours."

Tarkin raised an eyebrow. He was a secular man, many great men of the past had said religion was merely the spice of the masses. But in the current age, even the masses had mostly abandoned their historic faiths, at least in civilized parts of the Galaxy. Jedi versus Sith did not matter to him. Two ancient religions battling over dogma was irrelevant compared to the survival of the Republic, and more importantly, maintaining Human economic and political dominion over the Galaxy. But the idea of working for someone else while serving as head of state of the Republic filled his mouth with a bad taste.

"It's hard to work for someone who's dead," Greejatus said.

*A mind-reader could be very useful,* thought Tarkin. *You are reading my mind, aren't you?*

"I can sense your suspicion, Senator," said Greejatus, glancing behind him and lowering his voice further. "That is the extent of my powers, usually. The more in tune I am with the dark side, the more powerful my abilities become... Sometimes I can hear thoughts from afar, but for the most part, I can only know how you're feeling. Not that that hasn't been extremely useful, in my career."

"So, Sidious is dead, and the Jedi are hunting a ghost." Tarkin put a hand on his chin in thought. "Palpatine is dead too. But their servants are not. And you want me to carry out the plan of your dead masters."

"We are capable of doing it ourselves," Pestage said. "But it would take decades and decades of work, and we would be old and decrepit by the time we'd pulled all the strings that have been left to us. As Chancellor, you could pull those strings far more easily."

Greejatus picked up his comrade's pitch: "Lord Sidious planned a new Sith empire. A galactic empire. One state, one emperor, and one race above all others: Humanity. That is our plan. And is it not yours, Senator?"

"I do favor my people over all others, it is only natural," Tarkin admitted. "And a galactic empire... That does suit my tastes better than a toothless and rotten Repbulic."

"One step at a time, Senator. We're closer than you think," said Pestage.

"Oh, I've noticed," Tarkin said. "Palpatine so wondrously manipulated these idiots into giving him functionally unlimited power. The Senate is nothing but a stamp for the Chancellor."

"And soon, it'll be your stamp," said Greejatus, with a little smirk.

After the two had left, Tarkin continued drinking his tea. *Without a doubt, they're planning to make me a puppet of theirs. Especially that Greejatus. We'll see who becomes the pawn of who.* He turned the holotank back on, and watched what the babbling fools on HNN had to say about the Senate. Not an hour later, a story broke about Senator Padme Amidala's secret liaison with a Separatist diplomat on Naboo, just as Grievous had launched his Operation Striking Star. *And there goes the peace party's credibility...*

"Oh, our little Esera has grown up!" said Lirka, clasping her hands and smiling with something that looked like maternal pride.

"She's brought home a boy!" Sirka said, hand on her heart. "How time flies!"

Esera was about to melt, while Voyan stood stony-faced in silent endurance of the Sephi sisters' teasing. The two Sephi would not stop giggling and joking, no matter how many times Esera explained that Lieutenant Voyan was just her chief engineer.

"I'm not bringing home a boy!" Esera nearly yelled. "I just need your help making him look presentable for our meeting on Zeltros."

"Yes, they do lots of *meetings* on Zeltros, don't they?" asked Lirka, her smirk growing mischievous.

"It's not like that!" Esera did actually yell, this time.

"Esera, honey, please understand how this looks," Sirka said, putting her arm around Esera's shoulders. "We've watched you grow from a starved little bog-witch into a stylish and pretty young woman. Now you show up at our home with a young man in tow telling us you're both going to *Zeltros,* the steamiest den of carnal pleasure in the universe, for a vague meeting of some sorts that you won't elaborate on... You don't need to hide anything from us, you know."

"If you need time off with your boyfriend, just say so!" said Lirka.

Esera groaned, and put her hands over her face, trying to hide how red she'd turned. "Voyan, tell them you're not my boyfriend!"

"I am not the Captain's boyfriend," Voyan said. Even he was starting to blush under onslaught of the Sephi girls. "She's the captain of the ship I serve on. That kind of relationship would be highly inappropriate on a military vessel, which *Encounter* is."

Lirka and Sirka both squinted at Voyan. "Do you believe him, sister?" asked Lirka.

"He's a good actor if he's lying. Oh well. Let's take his measurements," said Sirka.

"We'll have you out of those grimy old fatigues in no time," Lirka said, before turning to Esera. "Just a joke, honey, don't get jealous!"

*I want to shoot everyone in this room and then myself,* thought Esera, wondering how she'd ever live this down. While the Sephi twins took care of Voyan, Esera made good on her promise to get R8 another oil bath after she'd gotten him dirty on Naboo. She spent the morning wandering Raxulon while R8 received a luxury cleaning and Voyan was dragged from high-end clothes store to high-end clothes store with the Sephis. Murshida had vanished into one of the city parks, seeking something akin to the wilderness of his former adopted home. The old Skakoan was used to life in a starship, but he could not abide being under the open sky without nature around him.

By afternoon, Lirka and Sirka had been diverted from their mission, because they called Esera's communicator from a salon. "Hey, Esera!" Lirka's voice said, her tone even more chirpy and cheerful than usual. "Turns out one of the girls here knows you and your boy! Get over here and explain yourself!"

*What?* Esera sighed, and hailed a taxi speeder. There was a remote possibility one of the employees might know Esera from the times the Sephi twins had given her a crash-course in fashion and self-care, but Voyan? He'd never even been down to Raxus Secundus as far as she knew. Esera tried to imagine Lieutenant Voyan in a salon, but she couldn't do it. The prickly mechanic had about as much regard for his appearance as her master had. *At least he cuts his hair...* Her master had scared her badly, the first time they'd met; he'd looked like a homeless junkie who'd wandered in from the lower levels of Coruscant. *That's where he'd probably just come up from, knowing him,* she thought. Esera smiled sadly at the memory.

The scene that greeted her eyes was not what she expected. Inside a high-end salon in downtown Raxulon were the Sephi sisters and the man who'd claimed to hate all aliens. He was sitting calmly with a blue-skinned Twi'lek girl. And not just any blue-skinned Twi'lek girl.

"Faera?" Esera asked.

"Lady Komara!" Faera yelled, waving. "Great to see you again! Come on, join us."

It was her, the slave from Zygerria! Esera almost couldn't believe it. On a planet of billions of people, Lirka and Sirka had managed to bring Voyan to the one establishment that had hired this girl. "I see you made it to Raxus," said Esera, joining the four of them. Faera was scrubbing away at Voyan's hand.

"That I did, Lady Komara. Thanks to both of you again for getting us out of that place!" said Faera. "Though your coralfish-loving friend has picked up a habit of getting lubricating oil stained into his skin..."

"I've never seen a coralfish in my life," said Voyan. "I'm telling you, those were the colors that were in style on Druckenwell when you two were little girls. No offense, Captain."

"None taken," said Esera. She was too interested in Voyan's suspiciously relaxed state of mind. For a man who idolized Xim the Despot, he sure was at ease, surrounded by alien women.

"There's nothing *wrong* with coralfish colors," Faera said, turning Voyan's hand over. "In fact, I kind of wish I'd been there to experience Druckenwell back then. It sounds like it was a blast."

"There were good times, yeah," said Voyan. "The best days of my life, honestly. I was young, I had a career in my sights, my landspeeder was faster than the port authority cruisers... They didn't even try to catch us when we raced at night."

*So that's what he meant about a less boring past,* thought Esera.

"Oh, naughty boy," Sirka said, giggling.

"I saw it in him the moment we met," said Lirka. "I thought, *this kid's trouble*."

"You know, thirty is long after a Human's childhood, right?" Voyan asked them. "In the Druckenwell days, though, yeah, I was a kid. A dumb university kid doing dumb things and getting into dumb situations. I'd finally made it out into the galaxy, the world was going to be mine." His mouth twitched upwards, almost into a smile. "I really did believe there was hope, back then."

"Don't be so morose," Faera said, holding up his hand to his face. "Look, if I can get that oil out of your skin, anything's possible."

"Alright then, maybe there still is hope," Voyan said. He was just humoring her, but that was more than he'd ever done for Esera. *Why is he so compliant for her, but such a grumbler with me?* Esera wondered. *That's not fair! I'm a Human too, while she's an alien!* As their conversation continued, Esera noted how Faera always kept one hand on his skin, how she kept the subject of their conversation light and her tone friendly, how she'd slowly edge into his personal space, right up until the moment he started noticing it. *Is this a technique she learned on Zygerria? Is she a low-level empath?* Finally, Esera leaned over and whispered to the Sephi sisters:

"What is she doing to him?"

Lirka blinked, and her eyebrows wiggled in confusion. "What do you mean?" she whispered back.

"The only other time I've seen him so... off-edge, I guess, is when we were minutes from falling into a black hole. Or when he thought he was completely alone."

"Talk about extreme," Sirka remarked.

"She's a Twi'lek, getting touchy is her nature. It doesn't mean anything, she's just doing her job, don't be jealous," said Lirka.

"I'm not jealous!" Esera said, glancing over to make sure the two of them hadn't heard. Faera had moved on to rubbing Voyan's shoulders, to the engineer's silent embarrassment and guilty pleasure. "I'm confused! I don't know if it's because of who I am or what, but getting him to let his guard down is impossible for me. He's... morose, like Faera said."

"Maybe Faera's just more approachable than you are," said Sirka, with an apologetic look.

"Look, Voyan isn't usually like this. The guy's on a self-destructive path and he's no use to me dead," Esera said.

The Sephi didn't know what to make of that; they looked at each other questioningly. "He seems fine to me," Lirka said. *Because you can't feel what goes on inside his head,* Esera thought, but continuing the conversation was pointless.

By the time Faera was finished, the mechanic-engineer looked much better than he had earlier in the morning. It was as if a film of grime had been lifted off of him. Combined with the new shoes, shirt, jacket, and trousers, courtesy of the Sephi, Voyan was a reborn man. *Wow, I never would have guessed he used to be that grungy Vulture droid guy.* She remembered what Khan had said about their appearances, the other week. Neither of them could alter their genetics, but some putting some effort into one's appearance went a long way. Esera wished they'd taught that at the Temple.

"Well, you actually look presentable for once," said Esera. "No more embarrassing me with the coralfish outfit, okay?"

"Okay," said Voyan. "But you should know, this is all way above my pay grade."

"Don't worry about it, I've got more money than I know what to do with," Esera said, in a low voice.

"Captain, I don't want to be a burden-"

"Quiet, lieutenant, a captain takes care of her crew."

Esera took care of paying the salon before the Sephi twins could. She tipped Faera generously, apparently, since the Twi'lek's eyes widened when she saw the number. "Uh, Lady Komara-"

"Don't say a word, Faera," Esera told her, before moving onto the next subject. "You didn't know any of the palace kitchen staff, did you?"

"I did, actually-"

"Great. Do you know any of their locations?" asked Esera. "I've been having Voyan do all the cooking but he only makes what he knows, and as deplorable as that planet was, Zygerria's had the best food I've ever tasted in the galaxy."

"Too hot for my tastes," said Faera, sticking out her tongue. "But I do actually know someone right here in Raxulon. She was the kitchen boss. Her name is Alize, she was always really nice, she's working over on... uh, hold on." The Twi'lek fetched the address of where they could find this Alize.

"Captain Komara," Voyan said, "are you looking to hire a dedicated cook?"

"If we can find one," said Esera. Nominally, Esera was head of Confederate Naval Intelligence. Her department's mission seemed to be negotiating with planetary leaders and recovering items of curiosity from enemy territory. On her morning walkabout of Raxulon, Esera had recalled her near-capture by Aspar on Naboo. *I need real back-up,* she decided. *That means I'll need more of a crew than an old Skakoan, a weird engineer, and a touchingly loyal astromech droid. And if I'm going to have more people on my ship, that means I'll need a real cook.*

"More time for work," Voyan said, looking up into the sky.

"More time to take care of yourself," Esera corrected him. The Lieutenant frowned. They thanked Faera, who thanked them again for what they'd done on Zygerria, and then bade Lirka and Sirka a farewell, though Esera knew it was never long before she saw the two again. The address Faera provided led them into Raxulon's alien district, which was a little seedier than the Human districts but by no means as sketchy Coruscant's underworld or Terminus. At a hole-in-the-wall restaurant, they asked a Duros about who they were looking for.

"'Ey, Alize," the Duros yelled back into the kitchen. "Two Humans here to see you. They look fancy, hope you're not in trouble because I sure ain't payin' your bail."

"I've never been called fancy in my life," muttered Voyan.

"Welcome to the big leagues, Lieutenant," Esera said back.

When Esera imagined the Zygerrian royal palace's kitchens, she'd thought them run by slaves, like most other things in the palace. So when a Zygerrian woman emerged the kitchen, Esera was caught off-guard.

"You asked for Alize, you got her," she said, in a thick Zygerrian accent. And her accent wasn't the only thick thing about her; she must have weighed a hundred and fifty kilograms, and she filled the whole doorway as she came out. Her skin was an off-white color like most Zygerrians, her fur, or hair, Esera wasn't sure what to call it, was a reddish-purple reminiscent of wine, and her teal eyes glinted in dying sunlight of the late afternoon.

"Uh, hi," said Esera, at a loss for words. "Um..."

"Our ship needs a cook," said Voyan. "Captain Komara here heard you were good. Word on the street is you worked in the Royal Palace's kitchen."

"Worked in the kitchen?" Alize looked incredulous. "Little man, I *ran* the kitchen!"

Internally, Voyan was rankled at the remark, but he made no show of it. Alize was more than half a head taller than Voyan, and she looked to be three times the engineer's weight. Voyan's reedy frame would do him no favors if the Zygerrian chose to make him see just how little he really was. *What is it with this galaxy and making me deal with huge people? Why is every Zygerrian I meet so much bigger than me?*

"There you have it, Captain," Voyan said to Esera. "She's who you were looking for."

"Right. So, Alize, I'm Captain Esera Komara of *Encounter*. Believe it or not, I was a guest at the Royal Palace a while back, and I was served the best food I ever had in my whole life. I know I look young, I am, but I've been all over the Galaxy, and I say that with honesty. I came here to offer you a job."

The big Zygerrian woman put a meaty hand on her chin. "Is that so?" she muttered. "What's the pay?"

"Um..." Esera knew absolutely nothing about acceptable pay rates, so she turned to Voyan. *Help me!* she thought.

"Sixty-four thousand credits a year," Voyan said. "About twelve hundred credits a week. That's industry standard."

Alize narrowed her eyes, and crossed her arms beneath her tremendous bust. "Sixty-four thousand? I smell Trade Federation," she said. "Which means you're Separatist navy. Why would I want to join the Separatist navy? Do you see these fingers? I couldn't get them around a blaster trigger! And good luck finding a uniform in *my* size! I sew my own clothes, you know-"

Esera wasn't going to lose the woman who'd cooked the best meal she'd ever eaten. "Two hundred thousand credits a year!" she blurted. "As a civilian contractor! No blasters, no uniform."

Both Lieutenant and Zygerrian stared at her. Alize's frown flipped into a smile quickly. "Oh, well. Two hundred thousand a year to do what I do best, even for the Separatist navy? When do I start?"

"Tomorrow, but really, today," said Esera. "We'll take you up to our ship and get you settled in. Make a list of what you need and I'll have Mister Murshida buy it before we pick him up."

"Give me an hour to pack," Alize said, before going back into the kitchen. "Hey, red-eyes, you miserably greedy little..."

"That was easy," Esera said. Voyan was still staring. "Do you not approve?"

"No, but..."

"Do you not trust her?"

"Actually, it's the opposite," said Voyan. "I don't trust skinny cooks. And if she were any fatter, she'd be a Hutt, not a Zygerrian. I think this woman is the real thing."

"Is it because she's an alien?"

"No! The problem is..." Voyan sighed, and looked around furtively. He whispered: "Captain, I make a hundred and thirty thousand a year, and I'm a professionally-trained starship engineer."

"Then I'm giving you a raise," Esera said. "How about, uh, three hundred thousand a year?"

"I mean, I won't say no," said Voyan, after a moment of silence. "But do you have any idea of what those numbers mean?"

"Not really," Esera said.

The Lieutenant exhaled slowly. "Captain, you and I are going to need to have a talk about fiscal responsibility."

Grievous's call for a new warship design had not gone unheeded. Dozens of ideas had been submitted, and he'd sent them all off to a rapidly-assembled team of astronautical architects. The best minds of the Free Dac Volunteers Engineering Corps, Hoersch-Kessel Driveworks, Sluis Van Shipyards, SoroSuub Corporation, and a cadre of Rendili StarDrive defectors, among others, all gathered at Minntooine to begin drafting design proposals. Grievous himself gave them the briefing.

"I have few requirements," he told the assembled designers and engineers. "In fact, I only have two: first, this new ship must be built at twice the speed of the Republic's *Imperator*." On his way to the briefing, he'd had a terrible vision of new Separatist warships being built at that pace, but being destroyed shortly after because of how awful they were. "Second, this new ship must have protection and armament at least as seventy-five percent effective as the Republic's *Imperator*. Preferably more, but I am not entirely without mercy."

His order was a tall one. He knew it, they knew it, but they had no choice if they wanted to win the war. In peace time, drafting a warship would take months, sometimes years if one included the time it took to work out the kinks of any fresh design. Grievous was giving his team weeks.

The diversity of opinion over what direction the new ship should take had surprised Grievous. Kronaak and Helnurath had proposed very similar ideas: a compact lump of armor and guns covering every angle, an ungainly and brutish vessel that was so hideous to behold that Grievous actually liked it. Khwaramenes and Pors Tonith had gone the opposite direction, presenting a design even more spindly than the *Recusant*, favoring maneuverability and speed, relying almost entirely on shields drawing from a massive pair of reactors for protection. Ricimer Eemon had the strangest idea: a ship that was essentially one gigantic turbolaser, with small, short-ranged point-defense batteries as its only other armament. The armored core protected the reactors, capacitors, living spaces, and hangar facilities, but everything outside of that was modular, and could be swapped out at any shipyard. Grievous was skeptical of such an idea, but it'd gained traction officers he held a degree of respect for. He wondered what his team of experts would decide on.

*Invisible Hand* had new passengers, in the mean time. Colonel Mofuwa of Jabiim and his charge, the former Jedi Zule Xiss. *Is this going to become a common event?* Grievous asked himself, observing Mofuwa and Xiss training in hand-to-hand combat on his ship's hangar deck. *Will failed Jedi keep turning up on my doorstep like stray farm animals?*

Something was not right with the Zeltron girl, he could tell that. She had a look in her eyes, half-haunted, half-hunted. *She's right to feel haunted, they brought her back from the dead, and turned her into-* Grievous stopped that thought, not daring to finish it lest he be forced to look in the mirror. *But what is she so afraid of?* The remark about nerve-stapling had gotten to her, but Grievous could find no information on that. It was a good he had an export in all things unsavory arriving soon. If anyone knew about nerve-stapling, it would be Clothar Aclinde, head of the Office of Information and Safety, Grievous's very own espionage and counter-espionage force. And with him would be arriving his most troublesome agent, the little girl who had never won a fight in her life and yet always survived... Yes, having Aclinde, Xiss, Mofuwa, and Komara all in the same room was going to be the most fun he'd had since he fought Luminara.

But whatever higher power was at work in the universe had other plans for Grievous. As he reviewed all the messages he was going to ignore, one caught his eye: a message from Kalee. *Now why am I getting a message from home?* Grievous was curious, and let it play.

The fuzzy hologram of a man from another life appeared. He was old now, scarred and worn, but the strength and vigor of his youth had not wholly faded yet. "Zharajayn," Grievous whispered.

"*You know who I am*," Zharajayn's hologram said in their native tongue. "*I know who you once were. Three Jedi infiltrated Kalee a week ago. They sought out your eldest surviving son, Faisaen. He told us they were asking about you, and did nothing to him. Their names were Shaak Ti, Ahsoka, and Asajj. They were gone days before we even knew they had come. Whether these names mean anything to you or not is beyond me, I am only reporting that they were here. The priests said that you are dead, a ghost in a shell. We are not to contact you, the gods have taken you where we cannot follow. But whatever the demon the aliens made from the corpse of the warrior I pledged my life to, I still owe him that much. Do with this information what you will. You will not hear from me again."*

The recording cut out. Grievous leaned back in his chair, hands folded in front of him, and spun around to look out the great window of his tower lair. *I see,* he thought. *So that's why no one from Kalee has acknowledged me. I'm a walking corpse as far as they're concerned.* Grievous was used to not caring what people thought of him. But to know his entire race regarded him as a demon in a dead body of another man was too much to ignore. *Am I a demon?* Grievous wondered. Yes, he was. He had but one purpose in this universe: to destroy the Jedi, at any cost. He was a monster raised from the dead, to bring ruin on his foes. An abomination in the face of all Kaleesh, an affront to the gods, the very gods that had abandoned him in his hour of need and let *her* die, who now used him for their own ends.

*Her*.

A sick feeling came over Grievous. He'd forgotten that woman. The nameless face that had haunted his dreams for years. No, not nameless, but he didn't even dare think her name. Twice he had lost *her*, twice too many times. *I know not what plan you have,* Grievous thought, staring into the heavens, where somewhere the gods of his past life dwelt. *I do not care for you, I do not serve you, I do not fear you. But to avenge the ones I loved, I will do whatever it takes. Do you hear me?*

Silence was the only answer from those cold stars.

Esera's tongue burned, but she didn't care. "Ah! What did I tell you, Voyan? Have you ever had food this good?"

The lieutenant's face was red from chin to hairline. "I like it, Captain," he said, even though he looked like he was dying.

"You said make it hot, I made it hot," said Alize, smirking. "Poor little Humans, can't handle their spices."

"What's the appeal?" asked Murshida, sipping away at his pressurized vegetable juice. "You two look to be in pain. Why would you hurt yourselves like this?"

"It is a good pain," said Voyan. "If life is nothing but pain, why not find enjoyable pain?"

"Capsaicin is an irritant. We use it in crowd control aerosols," Murshida went on. "Why are you eating it?"

"It tastes good," Esera said. "I don't know what else to say. I enjoy the heat."

"Insanity," the Skakoan scoffed, shaking his head.

"Don't mind these two," Esera told their new cook. "They've always got something to grumble about. Murshida's old and Voyan is... Voyan."

"I'm used to grumpy men," said Alize. "You should have met my ex-husband. I used to think he hated everything, but it turns out he just hated me!" She laughed, genuinely mirthful, but not without some sense of annoyance Esera picked up on. "For the last five years of our marriage he was sleeping around with some little twig of a harlot down in the city. Coward didn't have the guts to say it to my face, I had to find out from my son after he moved out."

"He must have known you'd beat him into a pulp," said Esera. Alize might have been fat, but she was strong, too. She'd carried all her belongings on and off the shuttle herself, two bags each big enough for Esera to crawl into and probably just as heavy, without breaking a sweat.

"Hah! I think you're starting to understand me already, Esera!"

"This man sounds like an idiot," Voyan said. "If my wife cooked like this, I'd never leave her."

The big Zygerrian narrowed her eyes a little, and leaned forward. "Are you in the market for a wife?" she asked, with a sly smile. Somehow, Voyan's face got even more red.

"Not currently," he managed to say. Alize could have picked him up and threw him over her shoulder and there would have been nothing Voyan could do to stop her, though.

*The Force has a sense of irony,* Esera thought, *sending all these alien women to tease Voyan... He had it coming, for being such a pain.* To preserve his dignity, the lieutenant switched subjects:

"When do we leave for Zeltros, Captain?"

Alize's fuzzy ears perked up. "Zeltros? We're going to *Zeltros?*"

"That's right," said Esera. The Zygerrian tapped the tips of her fingers together, her smile took a predatory turn, but she said nothing more. "But first, Voyan wants to stop at Minntooine."

"If we're going to Zeltros, I might as well get my speeder out of the fleet storage station," he said. "No point in paying for taxis or private drivers." The two of them had had a long talk about money yesterday, and Esera was now very aware of just how quickly costs could add up. Using Voyan as a driver had been his own idea, it would save up to several thousand credits. *Why* Voyan thought they'd need a way to get around the planet wasn't something he'd elaborated on.

"Grievous wants to brief me in person, so he'll be at Minntooine as well. Apparently there's a Jabiimi angle on this mission. I don't know anything more than that, yet," said Esera. "Voyan, you're coming with, since you'll be my back-up on the surface."

Neither of them had a proper uniform, and that was starting to bother Esera. Voyan only had his pre-war Trade Federation uniform, bland and boring and grey, and not representative of the Confederacy at all. Esera didn't even have that, she just had civilian clothes that looked somewhat functional. But really, she was just distracting herself from the fact she'd yelled at Grievous last time she talked to him. What punishment was he going to have in store?

They took *Whirlwind* to *Invisible Hand,* and then went up the familiar elevator to Grievous's tower-top lair. Upon stepping out onto the platform overlooking the vast chamber, Esera felt a vaguely familiar presence. Two presences, in fact. And neither was the cyborg, who sat sternly in his chair, like a king upon his throne.

"Welcome back, Komara," he said in a cold voice, not even acknowledging Voyan. "I have a surprise for you."

"Do I even want it?" asked Esera, leading Voyan down the steps.

Grievous gestured for her to turn her head, and before she could react to what she saw, a voice she knew broke the silence. "It's you!" cried out Lieutenant Colonel Mofuwa of the Jabiimi Nimbus Commandos. He pointed at her accusingly. "You're the one who ruined my operation on Zygerria!"

But Esera could not have cared less about Mofuwa in that moment. Her eyes were locked on a face she thought she'd forgotten. Perfectly sculpted cheekbones, eyes as green as a forest pool, wave brown hair down past her shoulders, skin a few shades off of pure red- there was only one girl Esera had ever met with those looks.

"They told us you died," said Esera, once the shock had worn off.

Zule Xiss was just as shocked to see her. "Komara? What the hell are *you* doing *here*? With *these* people!?"

"You're supposed to be dead! The Jabiimis killed you-" Esera stopped, sensing Mofuwa's feelings. "They did kill you. And they put you back together again."

"Congratulations, you figured it out," Xiss said, sneering. She looked around the room. "Can someone tell me why the weakest padawan in the entire Jedi Order is here? I cannot seriously believe that *Esera Komara* is in the same room as General Grievous with her head still attached to her body."

For once in her life, the perfect retort came to Esera's mind, petty and mean, but she couldn't help herself: "That's big talk for a girl who *actually* died," she said, earning a barely-suppressed snicker from Voyan.

"Oh, you little-" Xiss's hand flew to her lightsaber, but one sharp look from Mofuwa froze her in place, and Esera could sense a sudden spike of fear from Xiss.

"Still a hothead, I see," said Esera, crossing her arms and frowning. "You haven't changed a bit, just like Ahsoka."

"Don't you compare me to that brat!" shrieked Xiss, as a sudden flare of dark side energy boiled up around her. "Don't even say her name! She was handed off as a reward to Skywalker for leaving his pawns to die! The perfect padawan becomes the perfect knight, and gets his own perfect little bootlick to follow him around, the beloved star of the galaxy..."

Mofuwa had a bored look on his face, Grievous sat grimly silent, and Voyan was just confused. And then yet another person emerged out of the shadows. "How interesting, how interesting," he spoke, in a soft voice. The new man wasn't anything impressive. He was short, pudgy, balding, and bearded, dressed like a slightly-disheveled middle-aged university professor with much the same air about him. "Getting to meet two former Jedi, that was one thing, but getting to witness bad blood between them? You've outdone yourself this time, General." He joined Grievous at his desk, standing to the side.

"They are amusing, aren't they?" he rumbled. "Komara, Xiss, Mofuwa... you..." Grievous gave Voyan a glance. "This is Clothar Aclinde, my spymaster."

"Oh, that's such a dramatic title," said Aclinde. "I just run the Office of Safety and Information, that's all."

*I've heard that name before,* thought Esera, but that wasn't important right now.

"And so the Carammite reveals himself," said Mofuwa, with the slighted nod of respect. "We've been suspecting you were involved with the General. High-level Confederate operations have become much more professional in their operational security as of late."

"Guilty as charged," said Aclinde, smiling. "So, here we have Zule Xiss, the resurrected padawan, rebuilt and... re-educated by the Jabiimi National Worker's Alliance. And we have Esera Komara, the mysterious Jedi knight defector. What an interesting pair. And only one of them had to be brainwashed into serving us."

"I am *not* brainwashed," Xiss hissed.

"I'm more of a partner than a servant," said Esera.

"She thinks very highly of herself," Grievous told his audience. "Komara is the one woman chosen to save the Galaxy, in her mind."

"If not me, then who?" Esera asked him. She *didn't* have a high opinion of herself, quite the opposite in fact. But arguing that would just make her sound as petulant as Xiss.

"What a beautiful question!" said Aclinde. "If not her, then who, General? That is a lovely sense of conviction."

"You see why I have not cut off her head, then," Grievous said. "Weak as Komara might be, she has not failed me yet. Her motivation cannot be doubted. Unfortunately, her combat ability was mediocre, even before she lost her hand."

"Not so different from me now, are you?" Xiss asked, waving her mechanical hand at Esera.

"Actually, this is still my hand." Esera raised her right hand, letting her fingers twitch as they would. "I didn't want a mechanical one, so I had it sewed back on, hasn't worked right since."

"Weak and sentimental, how perfectly Esera Komara," said Xiss. "You were always a pushover, you never had it in you to harden up and get things done. Callo must be so disappointed."

Being insulted didn't bother Esera. Being insulted in front of one of her crew did bother her, though. Bringing the dead into their dispute only irked Esera more. "If you want to go, let's go," said Esera, putting her hands on her hips. "We've got a whole lot of empty space here, I'm sure Grievous won't mind me using all that training we did."

"I think that is a marvelous idea," Grievous said, eyes narrowed, "on your own time. Stop bickering. It is time for you to know your exact mission. Aclinde!"

The Carammite stepped forward, a holoprojector in hand. "Consider your ship doubled-booked, Captain Komara. Not only will you be heading to Zeltros to negotiate the planetary monarchy's exit from the war, you will also be covertly delivering the Jabiimi agents for their own mission." The hologram of a Nautolan man appeared. "This is Marko Riberre. His career began as a spice importer in Ibisa, on behalf of the Pykes, but he made a lot of connections throughout the underworld. Riberre made good investments, in legitimate business and his dealings with the syndicates and cartels. The war has made him a wealthy man, the Republic uses him as an in-between for their business with the Hutts. Whatever goes between them, Riberre takes a cut."

"Just another run-of-the-mill high roller," Voyan said."What's he got to do with us?"

*What is the run of the mill?* wondered Esera, confused yet again by the metaphors her engineer used. *And what's a high roller?*

"Riberre's facilitated the shipment of thousands of kilograms of glitterstim and other narcotics, bought from the Hutts with Republic money, to Jabiim," said Mofuwa. "These drugs are wreaking havoc among the proletariat. Quotas are not being met, overdoses run rampant, children go unfed as their parents light up and pass out the moment they get off-shift." Mofuwa's words stirred a reaction in Voyan, who immediately crushed whatever emotion that had tried to bloom in his heart, so quickly and abruptly that even Xiss glanced at him. That didn't bode well for Esera's peace of mind.

"Understandably, the Jabiimi want him dead," Aclinde said. "And you're going to help them, Captain Komara."

"I would much rather bring him into custody for a trial on Jabiim," said Esera, eliciting an eye roll from Xiss.

"He's *already* been tried and sentenced, and the sentence is death," Xiss told her. "We're just carrying out the execution."

"That's one hell of a justice system," said Esera. "No wonder you like these Jabiimis, Grievous."

"They are to the point," Grievous muttered. "Do you object to this mission, Komara?"

"I don't like it," she said, "but if I refuse to go then Zeltros is just going to get bombed to ashes, isn't it? So I don't really have a choice."

"There she goes again," sighed Xiss. "Back when we were initiates, she tried to talk her way out of duels, do you know that?" she asked to everyone in the room. "She's always been like this, trying to find an easy way out instead of do what has to be done. Even when there was *no* other way out but to fight, she tried to avoid it! Because she knew she'd lose! You remember that time we dueled, Komara? You'd just been beaten up all day by the other initiates trying to prove themselves. You *begged* me to let you go, to spare you. Oh, you were so scared! I had to chase you around the arena, you just wouldn't fight me! Weak, frightened, cowardly, that's all you've ever been."

The shame of that day returned in full force, with the memories Esera had tried her hardest to forget. Anger boiled up in her heart, and she tried with all her strength not to let it overwhelm her. Being humiliated in front of her first officer *and* Grievous was almost too much for her to bear. "Whatever else I am, Xiss, I'm a free woman," said Esera, even as cheeks burned red and eyes watered. "And I'd rather be that, than have a chain wrapped around my neck."

"Are you calling me a slave?" Xiss asked, her eyes blazing.

"No. I'm calling you a dog," said Esera.

Xiss's sneer broke into a snarl, and this time, she actually got her lightsaber out. The green blade snapped on, and a microsecond after, Grievous's magnaguards, before still as statues, activated their electrostaves. Even as Grievous rose to his feet, though, Mofuwa stepped in.

"Enough, Xiss," he barked. "Or we're going back to Jabiim to have you nerve-stapled."

The Zeltron girl stopped mid-step, her eyes wide. Her lightsaber went off, and she pulled back. The magnaguards stood down. Grievous glanced between the Human and Zeltron, counfounded. "Aclinde," he growled, "what is nerve-stapling? This isn't the first time they've brought it up."

Aclinde was beaming happily. "Why, General, that's an invention from my home planet! It's a quite simple. Imagine, if you would, a device that can be mounted to the back of one's neck and skull. We call it a staple, since it clamps on." He imitated the movements with his hand. "Micron-thin needles pierce through the skin and bone into the nervous system, allowing whoever controls the staple to send inputs directly into the subject's nerves. Hence, the nerve-staple."

"Those who have been nerve-stapled can be controlled like robots," said Mofuwa, mouth locked in a tight frown. "The problem is, they become little more than robots, barely capable of any initiative. My superiors think it's the only way we'll keep Xiss's impulsive destructiveness in check."

"Yes, if nerve-stapled merely removed dissenting thoughts, we would have stapled all of Caramm, I'm sure," said Acline, with a wistful sigh. "When I was running security, I just used them as punishment. Those who dissented or caused trouble would be taken to the punishment spheres for stapling. Why, I could get a confession out of any criminal by merely putting them in the presence of the spheres. I think the key was that you could hear everything going on within, but only see a hint of what was actually happening. You know someone's in there, undergoing unimaginable pain, and maybe it's someone you even know. Maybe it's someone you love. The... psychological terror of it was beautiful." The Carammite looked around the room, blinking. "Forgive me, I was rambling of happier days. That, General, is what the nerve-staple is."

"That's not all, though," Mofuwa said. A shadow of conflict passed over his face. "There is no true recovery from the nerve-staple. That's why it's only used in exceptional circumstances on Jabiim, to subdue the most dangerous and depraved individuals, who can't function in a civil society. The device... changes people."

"Ah, yes, the long-term effects." Aclinde spoke as if he'd forgotten a minor detail. "There are *indications* that prolonged use of the nerve-staple can permanently damage the subject's nervous system."

"If by damage, you mean turn into nervous wrecks and drooling animals..."

"An acceptable price for a *civil* society," said Aclinde, looking pointedly at the Jabiimi. "But any potential long-term side-effect aside, most people find the mere threat of having their free will eliminated quite terrifying enough."

*These are the people we fight alongside?* Esera asked herself, a deep and disgusted horror filling her spirit. Grievous turned to the great window of his chamber, looking down on the blue expanse of Minntooine, hands behind is back. He was torn, Esera could feel it in the force. The Grievous made by the Separatists delighted in the discovery of this new technological terror. The Grievous born of Kalee was outraged that such an abomination even existed. "You have your missions," he spoke, in a quiet voice. "Leave me."

"As you wish, sir," said Aclinde. The most awkward turbolift ride of Esera's life ensued, as she, Voyan, Xiss, Mofuwa, and Aclinde shared the cab to the hangar in total silence. Xiss stared daggers at her, Voyan was a mess of apprehension and discontent, Mofuwa shamed and angry, while Aclinde alone seemed satisfied. When they stepped out, Xiss pointed at her.

"The moment we're off this ship, it's on," she said.

Esera didn't even bother looking back as she walked away. "I'll be waiting."

"I have a bad feeling about this, Captain," said Voyan, easily catching up with her. "I think she actually wants to hurt you."

"She does... and she has before," Esera said, remembering those awful minutes in the arena during the initiate duels. "But what worries me is that this time, I don't want to run away. I want to hurt her back."

**Author's note:** Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri? In MY Star Wars fanfic? It's more likely than you think, reader. But hey, if Stellaris can steal nerve-stapling, I can too, and I'm not the one making money off it here. A few words on Zule Xiss: Star Wars sources say she's a Faleen, which is retarded, because she's clearly not a Faleen. I stick with the fan theory that she's a Zeltron. That goes much better with our upcoming arc. After all, Disney says there's no Truth in Star Wars, so reality can be whatever I make it. Why did I resurrect a character who is canonically dead? Because it makes good drama. And she's cute. And it's a great way to expose Esera to the shady things going on behind the scenes in the Confederacy. You didn't think I'd ever let her rest easy, would I? The suffering has only just begun!

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